

# Sir John Sparrow David Thompson

## Canada's Fourth prime minister

### Quick Facts

#### *Term(s) of Office:*

- December 5, 1892 – December 12, 1894

#### *Born*

- November 10, 1845, Halifax, Nova Scotia

#### *Died*

- December 12, 1894, Windsor Castle, England, while still in office
- **Grave site:** Holy Cross Cemetery, Halifax, Nova Scotia

#### *Education*

- Free Church Academy, Halifax

#### *Personal Life*

- Married 1870, Annie Affleck (1845–1913)
- Two sons, three daughters (four other children died in infancy)

#### *Occupations*

- Lawyer (called to the Nova Scotia Bar in 1865)
- 1871–1877 Alderman, Halifax
- 1882–1885 Justice, Supreme Court of Nova Scotia

#### *Political Party*

- Liberal-Conservative (forerunner of the Conservative party)
- 1892–1894 Party Leader

#### *Constituencies*

- 1885–1894 Antigonish, Nova Scotia

#### *Other Ministries*

- 1878–1882, Attorney General (Province of Nova Scotia)
- 1885–1892 Justice

#### *Political Record*

- Premier of Nova Scotia 1882
- Fisheries treaty 1888
- Creation of Canadian Criminal Code 1892
- Bering Sea Tribunal 1893

## Biography

*We look forward to it as one of the aims which are to be accomplished in the public life of Canada, because the Conservative party believes that the influence of women in the politics of the country is always for good. I think, therefore, that there is a probability of the franchise being extended to the women on the same property qualifications as men.* —John Thompson, September 1893, on women's suffrage

John Thompson's support for women's rights is only one aspect of the passion for fairness and justice that informed not just his ideals, but his actions as well. That the reputation of Canada's fourth prime minister has since sunk into obscurity is due to the unfortunate brevity of his term of office.

John Sparrow David Thompson was born in Halifax in 1845. Like his father, he worked as a reporter for trials and assembly debates. He articulated with a Halifax lawyer and was called to the bar in 1865. Although initially reluctant to enter politics, Thompson went from local alderman in 1871, to provincial Attorney General in 1878 and became Nova Scotia premier in 1882. When the Conservatives were defeated later that year, he left politics, and was appointed to the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia.

Three years later, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald was looking for a new Cabinet minister and the young Nova Scotian judge was recommended. After much persuasion, Thompson agreed to take the Justice portfolio and stand in the federal by-election for Antigonish. He proved himself to be exceptionally able and conscientious, with a reputation for fairness. As Minister of Justice, he represented Canada in negotiations with Britain and the United States on fishing rights and copyright.

More and more, the aging Sir John A. Macdonald relied on Thompson to carry out the business of government. Many considered him to be a natural successor when Macdonald died in 1891, but Thompson declined on the grounds that his Catholicism would be unacceptable to the party. While John Abbott served as prime minister from the Senate, Thompson represented the government in the House of Commons. He led the investigation into the Langevin scandal, which concerned one of his fellow ministers. At the time, Thompson undertook the huge task of revising the Criminal Code of Canada and getting it passed by the House.

Thompson so clearly proved himself as a capable leader, that there were no objections to his succession as prime minister when Abbott resigned in November 1892. During the next two years, he took part in negotiations with the United States over the Bering Sea sealing dispute, and settled the Northwest Territories school question.

A very important source of strength for Thompson was his family, in particular his relationship with his wife, Annie. They had married in 1870, having worn down the resistance of Annie's Catholic parents. Thompson was born a Methodist, but converted to Catholicism several months after his

marriage. Whenever they were apart, Thompson and Annie carried on a daily correspondence, in which it is clear that he relied on her for support and advice. It is also clear that they loved each other passionately; the ruse of corresponding in shorthand which began when they were courting, carried on throughout their marriage to disguise the amorous passages of their letters.

The Thompsons were close friends with Lord Aberdeen, the Governor General, and his wife. When Lady Aberdeen started the National Council for Women in 1894, Thompson supported her wholeheartedly and spoke at their inaugural meeting. His attitudes towards women were typical of his broad-minded philosophy.

Perhaps the women of Canada would have received the vote much sooner, had Thompson remained prime minister longer. While in Britain, at Windsor Castle in December 1894, he suffered a heart attack and died. The shock of his sudden death was felt on both sides of the Atlantic. Queen Victoria was concerned that Thompson be returned to Canada with due pomp and ceremony. Out of respect for his Catholicism she held a Requiem Mass at Windsor. Painted black, the battleship HMS *Blenheim* returned Thompson's body to Halifax, where he was buried. In Halifax, when the *Blenheim* docked, was a young artist, Frederick Bell-Smith, who made sketches of the battleship's arrival and Thompson's funeral. Sir Charles Tupper encouraged Bell-Smith to commemorate the Mass which the Queen had held in Thompson's honour, and the artist went later that year to Britain. He was granted an audience with the Queen to sketch her portrait. Bell-Smith executed three large paintings commemorating Thompson's death. One was destroyed in the House of Commons fire of 1916 and another is thought to be with the artist's descendants. The third is at Library and Archives Canada.

## International Relations

Thompson was one of the judges arbitrating the Bering Sea dispute. He had been appointed while he was Minister of Justice, but, by the time the tribunal in Paris got under way in 1893, he was prime minister. The tribunal upheld the right of Canadians to hunt for seals in international waters.

## Anecdote

### A prime minister's secret code

Canadian state secrets written in code? Clandestine strategies disguised from the prying eyes of the Opposition? How about love letters from a future prime minister written to his fiancée? Long before he had any aspirations to be a politician, let alone prime minister, John Sparrow David Thompson, a humble Halifax lawyer, courted his future wife, Annie Affleck, under the pretext of teaching her French and shorthand. Thompson's father had learned shorthand for his job as a reporter for both the court and the provincial assembly. He taught this skill to his son, who wrote his love notes to Annie in shorthand to evade the disapproving eyes of her parents. The Afflecks, who were Catholic, objected to her suitor because Thompson was a Methodist. But he persisted, and Thompson and Annie eventually married. A few months after the wedding, he converted to Catholicism.

In December 1892, Thompson became Canada's fourth and first Catholic, prime minister. Throughout their marriage, they maintained a daily correspondence whenever they were apart, and the shorthand continued to serve as a convenient cover for the amorous content of their letters!

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